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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BELGRADE 001576

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [SR](#)

SUBJECT: SERBIA'S SOCIAL AFFAIRS MINISTER TACKLES THE MENTAL HEALTH SYSTEM

REF: A: BELGRADE 1551 AND PREVIOUS

B: BELGRADE 1482

C: 11/2/07 KAIDANOW-BRUSH EMAIL

Classified By: Ambassador Cameron Munter, reasons 1.4 (b,d)

Summary

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11. (SBU) Labor and Social Affairs Minister Rasim Ljajic told the Ambassador on November 19 that he was disappointed that the recent Mental Disability Rights International (MDRI) report was so political, and he questioned the timing of the report's release. Nevertheless, Ljajic was open and willing to address the problems in the system, and he expressed appreciation for the Ambassador's support. Ljajic also spoke about the need to depoliticize the divide in the Islamic community, how to quell potential violence in ethnic Albanian-majority Presevo Valley, and cooperation with the Hague Tribunal. While his influence is limited (he represents a minority Muslim party), Ljajic can be a constructive partner as long as he remains in the coalition. End Summary.

Mental Health Report Harsh, But There Are Problems

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12. (SBU) Labor and Social Affairs Minister Ljajic said he was disappointed that the recently released report of U.S. NGO Mental Disability Rights International (MDRI) was so harshly critical of Serbia's care of mentally disabled patients. The report described only the worst examples of conditions and treatment in Serbia's institutions for the mentally disabled and portrayed them as the norm, he said. Ljajic recognized that those institutions cited in the report were in horrible condition, but said that MDRI should have come to the government with constructive suggestions instead of making political judgments--that the EU should withhold candidacy until Serbia addresses these problems. The report did not acknowledge that Serbia also had some very high quality facilities that met western European standards. Ljajic questioned the timing of the report's release and whether MDRI meant to destroy Serbia's credibility in the West.

13. (SBU) Ljajic said that, even though the report's conclusions were overstated, it would raise awareness about the need to reform the mental health system and could lead to public pressure for more government funding. Ljajic said that the government would close the worst institutions and improve the care in others. He was also investigating alternatives to state care, such as foster care and placement with biological families and in private institutions. He acknowledged that Serbia had neglected state-supported mental health care for many years, and speculated that it could take decades to reform the system. Nonetheless, Ljajic was confident the government could make significant progress in a very short time. He planned to release a progress report soon.

14. (SBU) The Ambassador expressed support for the Minister's work in the area and assured him that MDRI's report was not part of a sinister plot to condemn Serbia, as Prime Minister Kostunica had stated. Ljajic said the Ambassador's expressions of support were

even more important than financial support at the moment.

#### Political Meddling Sustains Mufti Fights

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15. (SBU) Ljajic, a Muslim from Novi Pazar and leader of the Sandzak Democratic Party, also spoke about the split in the Islamic community and recent violent incidents (ref A). The police, he said, had responded professionally to the disturbances and violence, with one exception when they had entered a mosque with their boots on and weapons drawn. Ljajic stated that the police were doing the best they could, in a difficult situation, to limit violence. Ljajic said the only solution was for one of the Islamic communities to emerge as the winner, and the other would have to give up and reintegrate. Unity in the community was paramount. While Ljajic said he had no personal interest in either group, he believed Mufti Zukorlic's followers would prevail because Zukorlic had the support of 70% of the community. (Comment: Zukorlic was recognized as head of Serbia's Islamic Community until rival Mufti Zilkic declared himself Chief of all Serbian Muslims earlier this year, see ref A. End Comment.)

16. (C) According to Ljajic, government interference in the Islamic community was at the root of the split. Zilkic's group would not exist without support from Kostunica and Novi Pazar Mayor Sulejman Ugljanin, Ljajic's political rival. Ljajic said he had told Kostunica that the problem would resolve itself if the politicians would stop meddling in the Islamic Community's affairs. He agreed the ball was in Kostunica's court but said it was best not to acknowledge that fact openly. The Ambassador could help by sending a clear message to the government and Novi Pazar's local government that political involvement in religious affairs was unacceptable. In the long run, the region needed further economic development to ensure its citizens not turn to religious extremism.

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#### Keeping the Peace in Presevo

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17. (C) Ljajic, who serves as President of the Coordinating Body for South Serbia, said he was planning to adopt a new strategy for Presevo Valley's majority ethnic Albanian population (ref B). He acknowledged there was a possibility for eruption of violence, post-Kosovo status, but he was confident that the government would handle the situation correctly and avoid problems. While attracting attention to destabilizing events might serve the interests of "certain political parties," (Comment: He was referring to Kostunica. End Comment) Ljajic said, he would urge the government not to provoke unrest. To that end, despite legal prohibitions against flying the flag of another state, he was instructing the gendarmerie to ignore displays of the Albanian flag on November 28, Albanian national day. (Comment: In the meantime, DCM has called the Albanian mayors of the majority Albanian communities and asked them not to fly the flag, in the interests of peace and stability. USOP is reinforcing this message in Pristina. End Comment.)

#### Cooperation with The Hague

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18. (SBU) Ljajic, who is also Coordinator for Government Cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), confirmed that ICTY head Carla del Ponte would visit Serbia on December 3. Ljajic said he was meeting several times each week with the security services, and they would intensively pursue new leads for capturing wanted war criminal Ratko Mladic in advance of del Ponte's visit. Time was up and Serbia needed to show results, he said.

#### Comment

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19. (C) Ljajic, although obviously caught off guard by hearing of the MDRI report in the press, was open, rather than defensive, about the need to address problems in Serbia's care for the mentally disabled. He visibly relaxed when the Ambassador assured him of support for his

efforts. Ljajic was surprisingly open in his criticism of Kostunica, recognizing that the Prime Minister would ultimately decide the outcome of the Islamic community split. Ljajic's idea that Zukorlic would prevail because of majority support for him is interesting, but Ljajic realizes forces more powerful than the Muslim population in Sandzak are at play, and that he will likely not influence the outcome. Ljajic has ended up with all the jobs no one else in government wants, but he appears earnest in wanting the best outcome for the people, not just the politicians, of Serbia, and he can be a constructive partner in U.S. efforts to promote a democratic, prosperous, and western-leaning Serbia...as long as he remains a member of the ruling coalition. End Comment.

MUNTER